



Chester-le-Street District Council

Report to:	Executive
Date of Meeting:	2 June 2008
Report from:	Director of Development Services
Title of Report:	Private Sector Empty Property Transitional Policy
Agenda Item Number:	9

1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to ask Members to endorse and approve Chester-le-Street's Private Sector Empty Property Transitional Policy which is attached at Appendix 1. The Policy demonstrates the Council's commitment to the effective management of empty homes in the District as well as fulfilling key actions identified in The Housing Strategy 2008.
- 1.2 The Empty Property Transitional Policy Strategy sets out the key objectives that the Council and its partners will work towards achieving in order to reduce the number of empty properties within the District. The overall outcome of the Policy is to deal with empty properties efficiently so as to result in properties standing empty for shorter periods of time leading to fewer empty properties in the district.
- 1.3 The Policy covers private sector houses which have been empty for more than 12 months. The Strategy will be reviewed on a regular basis so as to incorporate any changes which may occur in both local and national policy.

2. CONSULTATION

- 2.1 Consultation has taken place with Housing Strategy, Legal Services, the Council's Home Improvement Agency and externally with officers from Gateshead and South Tyneside local authorities. The Strategy attached at Appendix 1 is viewed as an interim strategy to take the Council up to reorganisation when a new overarching strategy will be developed for the new Council. Nevertheless all are agreed on the present

need to develop and implement an effective and imaginative Empty Property Policy in order to reduce the number of vacant homes within the District.

3. TRANSITION PLAN AND PEOPLE AND PLACE PRIORITY

- 3.1 The Empty Property Strategy clearly linked into the Corporate Plan especially Priority 4 “Regenerating the District”. Ensuring that empty homes become occupied results in improved environmental and social conditions as well as being a sustainable way to meet future housing demand. Consequently it will now contribute to two of the elements of the new single “People and Place Priority” namely Strengthening Partnerships and Neighbourhoods. This will sustain existing community engagement as well as supporting the Council’s Housing Strategy 2008. It also illustrates the Council’s multi-disciplined approach to improving the quality of life for residents in the Council’s district. Finally the Strategy supports the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy by working to improve the condition of empty properties and bring them back into use.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial Implications and Value for Money Statement

All costs of implementing the Empty Property Strategy at this stage can be met from existing budgets. However, there may be future resource implications for Environmental Health and Legal Services associated with an increased level of enforcement activities when dealing with empty properties. Any required increase in financial support would of course be the subject of further Member consideration in due course.

4.2 Local Government Reorganisation

The Strategy and actions made under it, in particular establishing and maintaining a database and enabling local solutions to be developed will allow the Council to take a fuller part in the LGR process in this area.

4.3 Legal

The Council has clearly defined statutory duties and powers in relation to improving standards in private sector housing. The Housing Act 2004 includes duties to keep housing conditions in the Council’s district under review and to take action when conditions fall below a certain standard. The development and subsequent implementation of the Empty Property Strategy will assist in ensuring that those duties and powers are appropriately met.

4.4 Personnel

There are no immediate implications for personnel. The duties of the Empty Property Officer can be absorbed by existing environmental health staff.

4.5 Other Services

The Empty Property Strategy may well impact upon the work of other council departments in particular:

- (i) Finance Section. Fees and charges associated with empty properties and enforcement action.
- (ii) Legal Services. Proceedings resulting from enforcement action, land searches and land charges.
- (iv) Community Safety. Bringing empty properties back into use should bring about a reduction in anti-social behaviour and a reduction in crime statistics.

4.6 Diversity

The Empty Property Strategy will provide a key source of assistance to vulnerable people particularly in the private rented sector by bringing empty properties back into use and thereby securing improvements to privately rented houses. This will improve housing conditions and property management which in turn will also help create more sustainable communities. The Empty Property Strategy is an effective means of intervention for vulnerable private sector residents.

4.7 Risk

There are a number of risks associated with not implementing the Empty Property Policy. It would reduce the Council's contribution towards effective regeneration of neighbourhoods and the promotion of sustainable communities. It could also contribute to housing market decline and possible market failure.

It may attract criticism from the Audit Commission because the Government expects local authorities to adopt an Empty Property Strategy.

4.8 Crime and Disorder

Clear links exist between the proposed interventions as a result of the Empty Property Strategy and the Council's remit to tackle crime and

disorder. The Empty Property Strategy will help reduce the crime and anti-social behaviour associated with empty properties

4.9 Data Quality

Every care has been taken in the development of this report to ensure that the information and data used in its preparation are accurate, timely, consistent and comprehensive. The Council's Data Quality Policy has been fully complied with in producing this report.

4.10 Other Implications

There are no other implications associated with this report.

5. BACKGROUND, POSITION STATEMENT AND OPTION APPRAISAL

5.1 Chester-le-Street's Empty Property Transitional Policy is attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

The number of empty homes is a significant issue locally and whilst there will always be a need to build new homes, bringing empty properties back into use will provide much needed affordable housing which is more economically viable than new build. The attached Policy sets out the overall vision for reducing the number of empty homes in the District through a combination of partnership working, media publicity, enforcement and the use of all sources of available funding. It sets out the objectives and priorities which will turn this vision into reality.

Ensuring that empty homes become re-occupied results in improved social conditions as well as a reduction in crime, anti-social behaviour and blight often associated with empty, derelict properties and the surrounding neighbourhoods. Environmentally it is essential to make every effort to renovate existing properties and by doing so minimise the need to develop greenfield sites.

The implementation of this Strategy will work towards minimising the number of empty properties within the Council's district. Initially it is intended to target properties in the worst physical condition, those which have been unoccupied the longest and those with a history of complaints. An action plan has been developed around the strategic objectives supporting the Policy. Performance against the action plan will be reviewed at regular intervals and Members will be kept informed of progress made.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 Members are asked to approve and endorse the Empty Property Strategy attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS / DOCUMENTS REFERRED TO

- 7.1 Government: "Empty Properties – Unlocking the Potential."

DCLG: "A Cure for Empty Properties."

Gateshead Council: Empty Property Strategy 2005-2008.

South Tyneside: Private Sector Empty Property Strategy.

Chester-le-Street: Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.

Chester-le-Street District Council: Draft Housing Strategy 2008.

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